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Following Young Fathers Further

Briefing Paper Two: Isolation, community and COVID-19



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From social isolation to local support: Relational change and continuities for young fathers in the context of the COVID-19 crisis

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Briefing Paper Context

In this briefing paper series, we draw upon data generated with seventeen young fathers (aged between 15 and 30 years old) who participated in the Following Young Fathers Further research study, funded by UKRI (2020-2024). In policy terms, young fathers are defined as those who have their first child or experience a first pregnancy when aged 25 and under. The age range of our sample reflects that some of the young fathers we interviewed were participating in research for the sixth time because they had been involved in a linked study called Following Young Fathers (2012-2015, Neale et al. 2015).

The data we present were generated for wave 1 of our extended qualitative longitudinal study. As part of this short series, we present emergent findings of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on the parenting journeys and support needs of young fathers.

In our companion papers, we consider the implications and impacts of the pandemic for the earning and caring trajectories of young fathers and in a forthcoming paper on the support services who have a remit to support young fathers. In this briefing paper, we consider emergent findings about the prevalence of social isolation, local familial and community support and mental health in the context of COVID-19 from the perspectives of young fathers.

Key Findings

- The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered the social fabric, affecting personal and family lives and changing the landscapes of partnering, parenting and the doing of family and community,
- The impacts of the lockdown on young fathers reflect a mixed picture. For some young fathers, the lockdown reinforced social isolation, while for others it was an opportunity for increased time to be alone and/or to support family members and children,
- For non-resident fathers, the lockdown triggered a renegotiation of access to children. This was a significant source of emotional distress,
- The pandemic produced new and more extensive practices of family and community participation among the young fathers that we conceptualise here as caring masculinities,
- The perception of reduced medical risk of the virus to the young men meant that they were often best placed to support family members and their communities. In most instances, shopping for parents was a continuation of existing family practices albeit with greater significance in the pandemic context,
- In the absence of state support local resources had a vital role to play. Families, communities and schools were the main source of both support and resources. In our forthcoming companion piece, we also explore the value of support groups for fathers.



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and state mandated policy of lockdown in March 2020, has had observable impacts on the organisation of family lives and personal relationships. Despite the recency of these major changes, emerging evidence suggests that the crisis has produced a multitude of disproportionate and uneven effects along traditional lines of inequality including gender, age, race and class (Power et al. 2020).

Even before the crisis young fathers experienced a range of disadvantages and were stigmatised because of their young age and gender. While the relative paucity of research about young fathers is beginning to be addressed (Neale et al. 2015), the recency of the COVID-19 crisis means that we know little of the immediate and short-term impacts of the pandemic on these young men and their families or about how families have responded and adapted to the new social conditions that the crisis produced.

A key, emergent finding was that young fathers were at heightened risk of loneliness and social isolation because of the lockdown. At the same time however, the crisis also engendered new forms of social solidarity and community support in the localities in which the young fathers live.

The impacts of COVID-19 and the lockdown on family relations

Even before the pandemic, cross-generational relationships were recognised as an important source of support for young parents and their families (Neale and Lau Clayton, 2015). Similarly, support networks and mutual interdependencies in communities and localities have proven to be vitally important to disadvantaged young people navigating deprivation and contexts of adversity (e.g., MacDonald et al. 2005).

While young fathers are often considered to be dependents in family contexts, we were especially struck by how much of a resource the young men were to others in their family contexts, especially their older family members. While some young parents remain somewhat dependent upon their parents, financially, emotionally and practically, the pandemic provided opportunities for increased family participation and engagement in the support of others. Their young age positioned them as ostensibly less at risk in terms of their health relative to older family members. Many had parents and grandparents who were shielding and required support to gain access to essentials like food and medicines. Non-resident father Dominic described the emotional distress caused to his mother because she had been furloughed. Attentive and attuned to her circumstance and emotional needs he became a key source of emotional solidarity for her. He called her more frequently to ensure she was okay and was able to support her financially:

I've been supporting my mum a lot more cause I think it...we underestimated the effect it were having on her mental health cause she was at home, not doing owt. [...] so giving her a little more contact time really because I think she's been a bit lonely and stuff, and at one point she wanted to go on holiday, me dad didn't want to, so I sort of gave her some money to sort of go on holiday and just have a bit of a break really. (Dominic, employed, single, aged 30)

In these ways, the pandemic provided an opportunity for the doing of caring masculinities (Elliott, 2016), expressed here as a facet of the mutual exchange of resources (material and emotional) both within and across households and between family members. Several described doing the weekly shopping for family members, a practice that for some was unchanged because of the pandemic and for others became more essential:

I've gone to the shop for my mum for a few times (Jonny, unemployed, single, aged 21)

I do all the shopping runs for everyone [...] I pretty much do all the shopping runs and I get like paint for the house and stuff and just general stuff like that [...] I've always really done it. Like I mean even when I was young I would go to the shop for my mam like because I lived in like a block of flats and the shop was like right beside it. So I would always go to the shop for ma mam. I've always gone to the shop for ma mam. I even went like to [supermarket] and stuff for her (Cole, unemployed, single, aged 19)

Exchanges of resources were multi-directional and the young dads described a variety of support provided by parents and grandparents. In some cases, the parents and grandparents of the young fathers were providing care for their children, a care arrangement that is known as kinship care. In others, support provided by the young dads' parents and grandparents was financial or involved being responsive in a crisis. Father of four, Craig, describes a harrowing situation early in the lockdown when the stockpiling of essential items like food and toilet paper was at its height. He demonstrates the constraints this imposed on his family, requiring them to rely on wider family members for key items for their baby:

[partner] and me were getting worried that we couldn't get no baby milk in or owt or nappies or stuff like that [...] the only thing that we've been really short of is baby formula for, for [youngest child] but that's because the supermarket near us hasn't had any in for a bit now [...] we did run out at one point but she rang her dad up and said, 'look can you go to [the supermarket] near you, get some baby formula and send it down?' and he did (Craig, temporarily employed, resident, aged 28)

Place based and community resources were also vitally important especially for those who were embedded in their localities. Schools for example offered invaluable support in the absence of formalised or specialised support services. Indeed, free school meal vouchers provided to Craig's family enabled them to avoid going to the shops as frequently, as they were able to afford to buy more shopping in one go. This was especially useful for Craig's family as they have four young children. During lockdown children were discouraged from accompanying their parents to supermarkets. The family also received food parcels. In another example, a school teacher was heralded for going out on foot to deliver school meals and work to children at home:

Yeah the school sent food parcels out to us...we did get school meal vouchers through for't kids so then we could get stuff in for their dinners at home...it has helped us out yeah because we've thought, well when everything was closed and they was only letting a certain amount a' people in shops and that it did help us out because we wasn't, we didn't need to go out as much. So in that aspect yeah it helped us out a bit (Craig, aged 28)

[The schoolteacher was] supposed to be coming every week with work. He didn't bring school lunches cause [daughter] stopped having them. I suppose we could've asked for them but anyway, would've been probably extra load that he didn't need to carry [both laugh]. So yeah, he was dropping off work for us as well (Jake, aged 26)

For most of the fathers we interviewed, providing support for family was a priority but investment in their wider community was also evidenced, indicative of social solidarity. Articulating a strong connection to his local area one dad spoke about how he distributed food to local community members, as well as checking in with others:

when [restaurant he worked] closed down, all of the stock I was distributing the whole stock around [area]. So I went to old people's homes, I went to homeless shelters, I went to churches. There was a few people who I knew less, was less, less fortunate than me. I just started distributing all of the stock before it went off [...] So everywhere that was needed I made sure I got it, especially because there was this big rush in the supermarkets of people taking too much of their stuff [...] I was the kind of guy that would go round knocking doors, asking people if they've got everything, that was me [...] in the beginning of a pandemic at the time, I said to myself, 'I've got everything in my house, my family's got everything in my, in their houses. I need to see if everyone's got everything in their houses' (Raymond, aged 26)

Local social solidarity and 'community spirit' which has long been observed as a compelling feature of family and community lives in deprived localities (Forrest and Kearns, 2001; MacDonald et al. 2005), was heightened during lockdown. The young fathers described their involvement in a broad range of informal supports and help for others. This took the form of financial support for those who were in stable employment (Tarrant et al. Briefing paper 1) but more often involved support with practical issues. Family members and local institutions like schools were also key sources of welfare when resources were constrained.

Social isolation and mental health

While we observed a range of caring and supportive practices among families and local communities, the lockdown also exerted unavoidable pressures on the personal and family relationships of the young men. Lockdown was imposed as an important public health response but it was not without social implications. Indeed, according to Ruxton and Burrell (2020) the enforced social distancing and isolation within households had major implications for mental and emotional health and well-being, with gendered impacts (Ruxton and Burrell, 2020). Men are at a heightened risk of becoming isolated and experiencing loneliness especially if they live alone or are already isolated (ibid. 2020). While many of the young fathers reported being unconcerned, and in some cases even indifferent about the virus itself, curtails on personal freedoms and confinement to households had consequences for the organisation of their personal relationships and parenting arrangements with inevitable effects on their mental health.

The lockdown forced choices among family members about who to prioritise as part of their family bubble, impacting on their dependencies and in some case reordering them. This was a source of tension and stress for some. The need to form support bubbles produced challenges in Jake's relationship with his partner for example. Jake lived with his partner and their daughter but at the time of the interview his partner and daughter had decided to stay with his partner's mum:

we [partner/mother of child] fell out at the weekend because of, basically because of COVID basically [laughs]. My mum, she's kind of paranoid about it, which I can see why she's....if she got it, it would be pretty serious. And I'd like to bubble with my mum but she obviously doesn't wanna have to pick between my mum and her mum, which is fine, but still we fell out, so she's gone to stay with her mum for a little while (Jake, aged 26)

For resident parents, isolation was expressed in terms of the pressures of caring for children without family support. For Adam, a young father who was already experiencing depression and anxiety, confinement to the home was a form of continuity. There was no real change from before but he was acutely aware of the impacts it was having on his son:

Well not, not great really. I mean I already suffer with anxiety and depression. I, I stay in house most a' the time anyway and going out's kind of difficult. So to be fair it, it's not really affecting me that much. It's been nice not having people out on the estate where I'm living and carrying on as much. And yeah it's, it's been quite nice for me but I think for [son] it's been driving him insane (Adam, aged 26)



In comparison to resident fathers who were able to invest more time in their children, non-resident fathers found the imposition of lockdown especially difficult to manage. Analysis of Understanding Society COVID-19 data suggests a high degree of stability in children's relationships with non-resident parents except in cases where relationships between parents were of poorer quality before the pandemic (Bryson and McKay, 2020). The renegotiations triggered with the mother of their children around access to children were a significant source of stress for young fathers especially when their relationships were already tenuous. This was especially the case if mothers and maternal grandmothers acted as gatekeepers by citing the virus as a concern (see also Tarrant et al. Briefing paper 1):

especially at the beginning when I wasn't able to see [son], I, you know, it put a lot a' stress on my relationship w' [ex-partner] and, you know, like being, you know, it, I don't know how, I dunno how to describe it. It was just a real stressful time and, you know, I put, I didn't cope greatly with it (Jock, aged 30)

Social isolation resulting from reduced access to children as well as a loss of community-based resources such as support services, further compounded the issue. Non-resident father Nathan spoke of this in relation to his mental health:

Obviously just being, like, stuck in the house isn't the best, isn't the best thing, especially with like my situation with [his daughter] as well because, I don't know, it feels not nice to be able to just be confined to, like, one place [...] cause you just wanna go out, you just wanna, like, forget about it, but you can't, you've just gotta stay in the house, and that's what I felt like (Nathan, aged 18)

A recent survey of British fathers revealed that 47% struggled with a lack of social interaction during the pandemic (Movember, 2020; Levita, 2020), an issue that is especially heightened for non-resident fathers (Parenting NI, 2020). The fathers we interviewed were young and deeply embedded in local networks of family and friends. Being prohibited from seeing family and friends was therefore especially isolating.

Recommendations and conclusions

- Our findings reflect a spectrum of social supports that were triggered in response to the lockdown. Local resources and community-based forms of social solidarity proved to be vital in ameliorating some of the immediate impacts and consequences of the pandemic for these young men, their children and their wider families. The lockdown also had relational consequences, requiring families to determine who they would 'bubble' with. Non-resident young fathers were especially vulnerable to social isolation and physical isolation in the early months of the crisis.
- The young fathers in this study were a significant source of social support for their families and were resourceful in the context of a crisis. Young fathers are often positioned in policy and public discourse as dependents who have dependents. Deficit language like this works to obscure how young fathers are embedded in their family contexts, the varied ways they participate in families, as well as the complex nature of interdependency in low-income families.
- The young fathers described a strong sense of community, close family ties, and embeddedness in local networks as essential for getting by in a time of adversity. Exchanges of resources and support, whether emotional or material, were multi-directional with young fathers supporting older family members and vice versa.
- As an important form of social capital during the pandemic, many young fathers played a vital role in supporting older family members, especially for those who were shielding.
- Social isolation was a problematic aspect of the lockdown for some however, especially if they were non-resident or had poorer quality relationships with children and child's/children's mother beforehand. These young men felt most isolated from wider family and friends and there were noticeable impacts on their mental health and well-being.
- While there is value in acknowledging these vital forms of family participation, the loss of sustainable community-based resources and support services was problematic.
- We recommend that services remain attentive to the support needs of young fathers and develop a caring and compassionate approach that acknowledges the longer-term implications of the pandemic on the mental health and well-being of young fathers.

- Support during the pandemic was predominantly locally embedded and community based. Despite this, the impacts of the pandemic fell disproportionately on individuals and communities with finite resources. If we are to build back better, we encourage policy makers to remain alert to the support needs of young men and their families and to demonstrate continued commitment to, and investment in, sustainable local and community-based supports.

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